

Job 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Job chapter 9. Then Job answered and said, Truly I know that it is so. But how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. He is wise in heart and mighty in strength, who has hardened himself against him and succeeded.

He who removes mountains, and they know it not, when he overturns them in his anger, who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble, who commands the sun and it does not rise, who seals up the stars, who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea, who made the bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south, who does great things beyond searching out, and marvellous things beyond number. Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not. He moves on, but I do not perceive him. Behold, he snatches away. Who can turn him back? Who will say to him, What are you doing? God will not turn back his anger. Beneath him bowed the helpers of Rahab.

How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him. I must appeal for mercy to my accuser. If I summoned him and he answered me, I would not believe that he was listening to my voice. For he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause.

He will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness. If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty. If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him? Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me. Though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. I am blameless.

I regard not myself. I loathe my life. It is all one. Therefore, I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked. He covers the faces of its judges.

[1 : 59] If it is not he, who then is it? My days are swifter than a runner. They flee away. They see no good. They go by like skiffs of reed, like an eagle swooping on the prey. If I say, I will forget my complaint. I will put off my sad face and be of good cheer. I become afraid of all my suffering, for I know you will not hold me innocent. I shall be condemned. Why then do I labor in vain? If I wash myself with snow, and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into a pit, and my own clothes will abhor me. For he is not a man as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both. Let him take his rod away from me, and let not dread of him terrify me. Then I would speak without fear of him, for I am not so in myself. In Job chapter 9, Job expresses his powerlessness and the futility of trying to make a case with God. This is Job's response to the first speech of Bildad, the second of his friends to speak to him in the first cycle of speeches. As David Clines notes, here we see a shift beyond

Job's preoccupation with his suffering, to the question of his vindication. Job's concern is not merely for an end to his suffering, but that he be vindicated as a righteous man, and a man in good standing with the Lord. His opening statement, truly I know that it is so, probably refers back to Bildad's insistent claims that God does not pervert justice. But Job isn't claiming that God is unjust, or even that he is simply arbitrary. His claim seems to be that God is more indifferent, and distant, and cold. God is aloof, and in his power unapproachable, and there is no way of making a case with God so as to be heard. Job has never denied the justice of God, nor has he been claiming against Eliphaz that man can stand before God's perfect holiness without being seen to be thoroughly corrupted by sin, even in his best deeds. Job's concern is not with these things, but with being vindicated before God and his neighbours. The point, as Clines observes, is not of winning a case against

God, but of prevailing upon God to declare him to be in right standing with him. Again, Job is not focused upon ending his suffering, but upon public vindication. He wants God, through action on

Job's behalf, publicly to demonstrate Job to be a man in good standing with him. And there seems to be no mechanism by which this could be achieved. How could one even hope to go about it? No attempt could enjoy any success. One could not enter into a successful legal dispute with the Lord. Anyone who attempted to do so would be utterly outmatched and would be struck dumb by God's answers. In verses 5-10, Job makes a lengthy expression of God's glory and his power. Eliphaz had made a comparable series of statements in chapter 5 verses 9-16.

Who does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number. He gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields. He sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope at noonday as in the night. But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts her mouth.

That there is a relationship between these two statements of God's glory, is suggested by a comparison between verse 9 of chapter 5, who does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number, and verse 10 of this chapter, who does great things beyond searching out, and marvellous things beyond number. However, when we look closer at the statements, we can see that although they both express the glory of God, they have a very different import. The statement of Eliphaz highlights the glory of God, the deliverer. God is the one who reverses fortunes. He's the one who acts on behalf of his people with his might. On the other hand, Job's statement is a statement of the wonders and the majesty and the mystery of God, as the one who is inapproachable, aloof, distant, and who simply cannot be prevailed upon or reasoned with. God, as seen here, is so great and powerful and transcendent, that man is not even like the smallest insect to him. Just as an insect's concerns and sense of justice could not prevail upon a human being, so God in his greatness is utterly above Job's concerns. Note well, the statement here is not that God is unjust, or even that

[6 : 44] God is arbitrary, but that he is so great that no human being can really deal with him. This is the God who shakes the very earth, who determines the position of the sun, who puts the stars in their places, who stretches out the heavens, who controls the sea, who made the great constellations. We have another description of the Lord's power over the constellations in chapter 38 verses 31 and 32. Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazaroth in their season, or can you guide the bear with its children? Job's vision of God here is terrifying. A God who is great and indifferent to mankind, who can inflict suffering without sympathy, and disaster without recourse. When God acts, no one can appeal, protest, or question it. His power is so great that he is the master of the monsters of chaos.

Rahab, for instance, in verse 13. Rahab is also mentioned in Psalm 89 verses 9 to 10. You rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. And then in Isaiah chapter 51 verse 9. Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? In verses 14 following, Job expresses just how sorely he is outmatched by God. There is no way that he can make a case with such a God. There is no law court to which he could summon him, and Job's strength is clearly as nothing compared to the strength of the Lord.

Even if, in the extreme hypothetical case, he was able to make a case with the Lord, the Lord's majesty would so overaw him that he suspects he would end up arguing against himself. Job knows, as the reader also knows, that he is blameless. But yet he also loathes his life. All this affliction has been brought upon him. He seems cast off by God, and he is harshly accused by his friends. The fact that all of these things have befallen him, and yet he is still blameless, leads him to the conclusion, it seems unavoidable, that God destroys both the blameless and the wicked alike. He is indifferent to the fate of the righteous. As further evidence for this disheartening claim, he gives the example of oppression. When oppression overwhelms a land, from whom does it come? Who permits it? If it isn't God, then who is it? In verses 25 and 26, Job describes the briefness and the swiftness of his life.

His days, which are racing by, are days of unrelenting suffering. They're swift as a runner, swift as a skiff of reed, a papyrus boat on the river, and swifter than an eagle swooping down on its prey. In these images of ever-increasing speed, Job is, as it were, fast-forwarding through many scenes of

his life, of non-stop and unmitigated suffering. He wonders to himself, would it be best if he just tried to put a brave face upon things, to try as much as possible just to go on with his life and not become preoccupied with his sufferings? And yet then he fears that the Lord will bring further suffering upon him, because he is persuaded that as the Lord is not vindicating him, he will continue to deal with him as one who is not innocent. Even if he went through the most elaborate external procedure of demonstrated and protested innocence, washing himself with snow and cleansing his hands with lye, the Lord would nonetheless plunge him into a filthy pit that marked him out as guilty, and so much so that even his own clothes would now abhor him, not just his friends and family. He sums up the issue in the concluding verses. God cannot be reckoned with as with another man. There is no go-between, no mediator, no negotiator. There is no arbiter that can come between Job and God and try and work out their misunderstanding. There is no higher law to which Job can appeal. There is no fitting third party. There is no level ground upon which both God and Job can stand. The one concerning whom he is presenting his case is so great and powerful as to terrify him. So intimidated by this God, Job cannot deal directly with him. If there were an arbiter, the arbiter could insist that God not terrorise Job, and they could perhaps come to terms. But there is no such possibility when dealing with the God of all creation. Job's situation seems utterly hopeless. A question to consider. If we were in the position of counselling Job, what scriptural truths would we address to his complaints here?